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ADDRESS
OF
PRESIDENT WILSON
TO THE
CITIZENSHIP CONVENTION

WILSON NORMAL SCHOOL BUILDING
WASHINGTON, D. C., JULY 13, 1916



WASHINGTON
1916



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ADDRESS.

MR. CHAIRMAN, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN :

I have come here for the simple purpose of expressing my very deep interest in what these conferences are intended to attain. It is not fair to the great multitudes of hopeful men and women who press into this country from other countries that we should leave them without that friendly and intimate instruction which will enable them very soon after they come to find out what America is like at heart and what America is intended for among the nations of the world.

I believe that the chief school that these people must attend after they get here is the school which all of us attend, which is furnished by the life of the communities in which we live and the nation to which we belong. It has been a very touching thought to me sometimes to think of the hopes which have drawn these people to America. I have no doubt that many a simple soul has been thrilled by that great statue standing in the harbor of New York and seeming to lift the light of liberty for the guidance of the feet of men; and I can imagine that they have expected here something ideal in the treatment that they will receive, something ideal in the laws which they would have to live under, and it has caused me many a time to turn upon myself the eye of examination to see whether there burned in me the true light of the American spirit which they expected to find here. It is easy, my fellow-citizens, to communicate physical lessons, but it is very difficult to communicate spiritual lessons. America was intended to be a spirit among the nations of the world, and it is the purpose of conferences like this to find out the best way to introduce the newcomers to this spirit, and by that very interest in them to enhance and purify in ourselves the thing that ought to make America great and not only ought to make her great, but ought to make her exhibit a spirit unlike any other nation in the world.

I have never been among those who felt comfortable in boasting of the superiority of America over other countries. The way to cure yourself of that is to travel in other countries and find out how much of nobility and character and fine enterprise there is everywhere in the world. The most that America can hope to do is to show, it may be, the finest example, not the only example, of the things that ought to benefit and promote the progress of the world.

So my interest in this movement is as much an interest in ourselves as in those whom we are trying to Americanize, because if we are genuine Americans they cannot avoid the infection; whereas, if we are not genuine Americans, there will be nothing to infect them with, and no amount of teaching, no amount of exposition of the Constitution,—which I find very few persons understand,—no amount of dwelling upon the idea of liberty and of justice will accomplish the object we have in view, unless we ourselves illustrate the idea of justice and of liberty. My interest in this movement is, therefore, a two-fold interest. I believe it will assist us to become self-conscious in respect of the fundamental ideas of American life. When you ask a man to be loyal to a government, if he comes from some foreign countries, his idea is that he is expected to be loyal to a certain set of persons like a ruler or a body set in authority over him, but that is not the American idea. Our idea is that he is to be loyal to certain objects in life, and that the only reason he has a President and a Congress and a Governor and a State Legislature and courts is that the community shall have instrumentalities by which to promote those objects. It is a cooperative organization expressing itself in this Constitution, expressing itself in these laws, intending to express itself in the exposition of those laws by the courts; and the idea of America is not so much that men are to be restrained and punished by the law as instructed and guided by the law. That is the reason so many hopeful reforms come to grief. A law cannot work until it expresses the spirit of the community for which it is enacted, and if you try to enact into law what expresses only the spirit of a small coterie or of a small minority, you know, or at any rate you ought to know, beforehand that it is not going to work. The object of the law is that there, written upon these pages, the citizen should read the record of the experience of this state and nation: what they have concluded it is necessary for them to do because of the life they have lived and the things that they have discovered to be elements in that life. So that we ought to be careful to maintain a government at which the immigrant can look with the closest scrutiny and to which he should be at liberty to address this question: "You declare this to be a land of liberty and of equality and of justice; have you made it so by your law?" We ought to be able in our schools, in our night schools and in every other method of instructing these people, to show them that that has been our endeavor. We cannot conceal from them long the fact that we are just as human as any other nation, that we are just as selfish, that there are just as many mean people amongst us as anywhere else, that there are just as many people here who want to take advantage of other people as you can find in other countries, just as many cruel people, just as many

people heartless when it comes to maintaining and promoting their own interest; but you can show that our object is to get these people in harness and see to it that they do not do any damage and are not allowed to indulge the passions which would bring injustice and calamity at last upon a nation whose object is spiritual and not material.

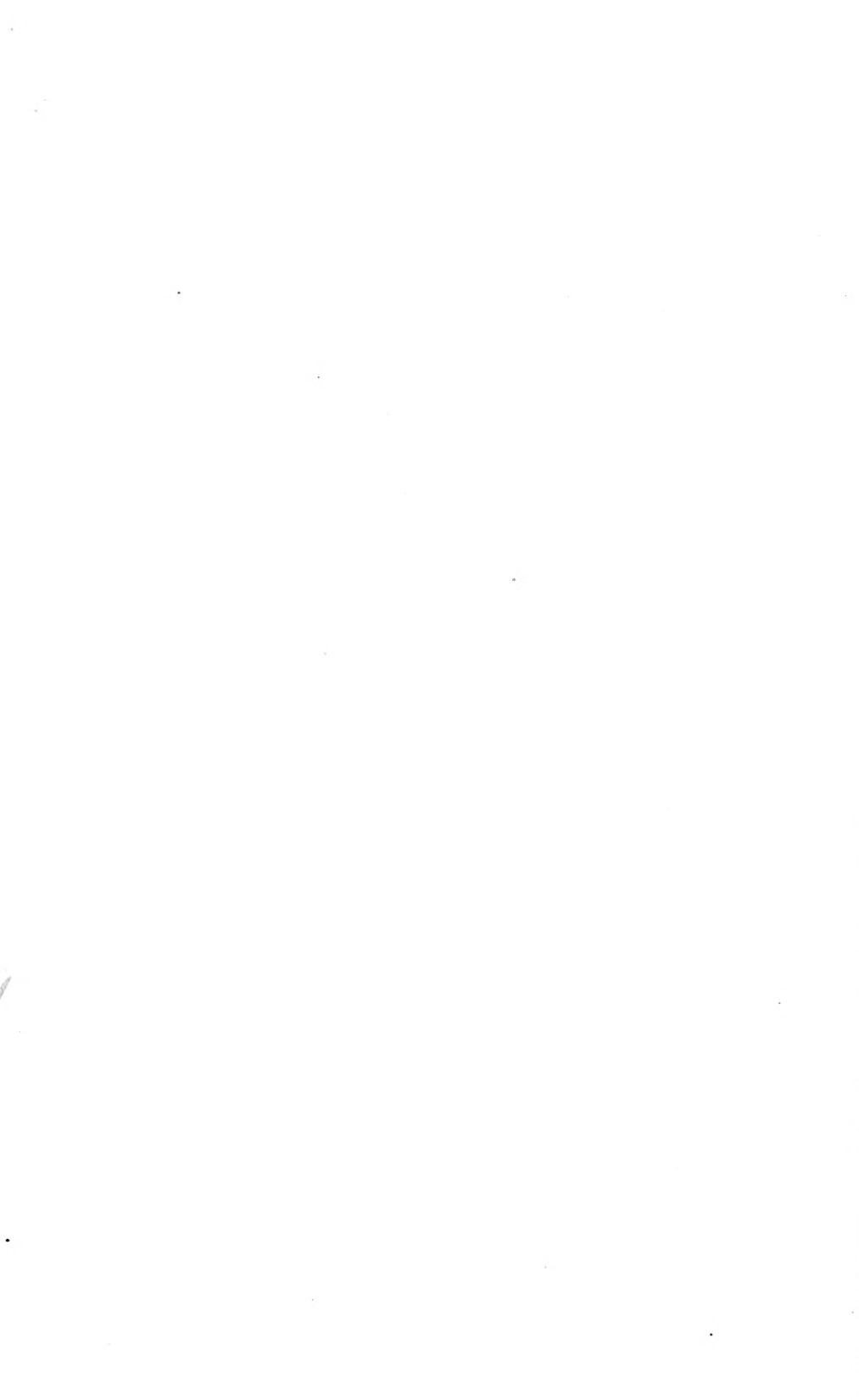
America has built up a great body of wealth. America has become, from the physical point of view, one of the most powerful nations in the world, a nation which if it took the pains to do so, could build that power up into one of the most formidable instruments in the world, one of the most formidable instruments of force, but which has no other idea than to use its force for ideal objects and not for self-aggrandizement.

We have been disturbed recently, my fellow-citizens, by certain symptoms which have showed themselves in our body politic. Certain men,—I have never believed a great number,—born in other lands, have in recent months thought more of those lands than they have of the honor and interest of the government under which they are now living. They have even gone so far as to draw apart in spirit and in organization from the rest of us to accomplish some special object of their own. I am not here going to utter any criticism of these people, but I want to say this, that such a thing as that is absolutely incompatible with the fundamental idea of loyalty, and that loyalty is not a self-pleasing virtue. I am not bound to be loyal to the United States to please myself. I am bound to be loyal to the United States because I live under its laws and am its citizen, and whether it hurts me or whether it benefits me, I am obliged to be loyal. Loyalty means nothing unless it has at its heart the absolute principle of self-sacrifice. Loyalty means that you ought to be ready to sacrifice every interest that you have, and your life itself, if your country calls upon you to do so, and that is the sort of loyalty which ought to be inculcated into these newcomers, that they are not to be loyal only so long as they are pleased, but that, having once entered into this sacred relationship, they are bound to be loyal whether they are pleased or not; and that loyalty which is merely self-pleasing is only self-indulgence and selfishness. No man has ever risen to the real stature of spiritual manhood until he has found that it is finer to serve somebody else than it is to serve himself.

These are the conceptions which we ought to teach the newcomers into our midst, and we ought to realize that the life of every one of us is part of the schooling, and that we cannot preach loyalty unless we set the example, that we cannot profess things with any influence upon others unless we practice them also. This process of Americanization is going to be a process of self-examination, a process of purification, a process of rededication to the things which America represents and is proud to represent. And it takes a great

deal more courage and steadfastness, my fellow-citizens, to represent ideal things than to represent anything else. It is easy to lose your temper, and hard to keep it. It is easy to strike and sometimes very difficult to refrain from striking, and I think you will agree with me that we are most justified in being proud of doing the things that are hard to do and not the things that are easy. You do not settle things quickly by taking what seems to be the quickest way to settle them. You may make the complication just that much the more profound and inextricable, and, therefore, what I believe America should exalt above everything else is the sovereignty of thoughtfulness and sympathy and vision as against the grosser impulses of mankind. No nation can live without vision, and no vision will exalt a nation except the vision of real liberty and real justice and purity of conduct.





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